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Short Story. RED VENGEANCE. About 3500 words.

By Winifred A. Tims.

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The heart of Otter Woman burned within her as she squatted on the ground outside her teepee and pounded choke-cherries on a large, flat stone.

The brown prairie grass of the hillside was lit with warm glowing colors by the descending sun, while in the little valley below the river writhed its sinuous way between banks shimmering with the silver leaves of the buffalo willow.

But to Otter Woman the calm loveliness of the early evening brought neither peace nor serenity. In her eyes was bitter resentment and in her heart was storm; for Eagle Tail, her husband, that Blackfoot brave of renown, had on the last tribal war-raid taken captive a daughter of the Crees; and now what his wife in her heart had always feared had at last come to pass, and he had brought the stranger home to his tent.

As she packed the last of her berries into a large skin bag, the newcomer, a slight figure of a girl bowed beneath a load of willow sticks, came toiling up the hillside towards the camp. She walked slowly, halting every few steps, and taking her breath in great, gasping sobs. Behind her a ~~kkkkk~~ mongrel cur dragged along a little travois laden with a small keg of water. Scornfully Otter Woman eyed her as, with a deep sigh of relief, she loosed the rope that bound the wood to her shoulders and let the sticks clatter to the ground. Her thin cheeks were flushed with exertion, and with shaking hands she passed a corner of her scarlet blanket over her damp forehead and hair and wiped away the perspiration that streamed down her face.

For a time the two women sat in a silence broken only by the quick breating and short sharp coughs of the Cree, and the panting of the dog, who, finding that no one was yet disposed to relieve him of his harness, had dropped down, and lay patiently waiting for release.

At length Otter Woman could restrain herself no longer.

"Are you going to sit there all night?" she demanded. "Eagle Tail will be back soon, and if the food is not ready for him when he comes in he will beat you."

Wearily the girl arose.

"I was tired," she said in halting, broken Blackfoot,"and the hill is long and steep."

Otter Woman sniffed contemptuously.

"Had Eagle Tail known what a lazy, good-for-nothing creature he had found, your scalp would now be hanging from his belt," she sneered. "Were there no women in your camp who could work, or are all the Cree squaws as lazy as yourself?"

To this the captive made no answer. Only the dog saw the drops that splashed on the ground as she stooped and loosened him from the travois.

A sudden pang of compassion shot through the heart of the Blackfoot woman, but it was as quickly stifled. Otter Woman was not by nature of an unkind disposition. To her own people she was always ready to give sympathy and help in any kind of sorrow or sickness. But this Cree interloper she hated with all the force of her savage nature - not merely because a second wife had come to the teepee where for so long she had reigned alone, but because the new wife might provide her husband with the child she herself had failed to give him; this was the secret of the bitter jealousy which was eating into her very soul.

True, the Cree girl was stricken with the terrible coughing-sickness,

that scourge of the Redskin; but it was a disease with which Indians frequently lingered for many months, or even years, and the bare possibility that the stranger might in time come to be the favourite wife of their joint husband filled her with dread and foreboding.

Therefore, although the evident distress and sorrow of the unhappy captive aroused in her a sudden and unexpected impulse of compassion and pity, she ruthlessly repressed it, and obstinately refrained from showing by word or look the smallest grain of sympathy or kindness.

It was late when, the evening meal ended, the Cree girl betook herself to a clump of trees not far from the tent and sat down on the coarse wild grass. With hopeless eyes she turned her gaze towards the east from whence she had been carried off, yearning with an intense longing for those from whom she had been so cruelly sundered.

Within the teepee Otter Woman and Eagle Tail reclined against gaily decorated backrests hanging from tripods of carved and painted sticks. Few words were spoken, for both had brought out their crudely made pipes and were puffing away at the dried kinni-kinnick or Indian tobacco which it was the woman's duty to gather and prepare for use. Every now and again, at a gruff syllable from her husband, she would rise and fetch from the camp-fire just outside a lighted twig to apply to his pipe.

As the sound of her rival's frequent and hacking cough came to them, the frown on Otter Woman's face deepened. She could no longer conceal the resentment and burning indignation which had been raging within her.

"Listen to that Cree dog, coughing, coughing all the time!" she burst out. "What a fool you were to bring a weak, sickly creature like that to live in your tent. A lot of good she will ever be to you or to anyone!"

Eagle Tail withdrew his pipe from his mouth and stared in offended amaze.

"What's the matter with her this time?" he demanded tartly. "She's all right!"

"Matter!" snorted his wife in disgust. "Matter! Why, she can't walk a mile before her strength is all gone; her arms are too weak to crush the choke-cherries properly, or to scrape the hides clean; and as for carrying a good load on her back, any papoose could do better!"

"Well, you're strong enough for two," Eagle Tail flung back at her, incensed at this unseemly reflection upon his judgment.

"Ai, ai," came the angry reply,"for many moons my hands alone have worked for you, and you have wanted nothing. All the buffaloes that you killed have I skinned, and their hides have I made into soft robes and their flesh into pemmican. And is not the chief himself envious of this very teepee?"

With gestures indicating the round, sloping sides of their abode and the garments hanging from one of the poles she continued, her voice rising higher and higher as she worked herself up into a very frenzy of passion.

"Have I not beaded your moccasins and hunting shirts so that no Blackfoot brave is as fine as you? Have I not -"

"Hold your tongue!" ordered the man, roughly interrupting her recital. "You do nothing nowadays butscold, scold, scold. Any other woman would be proud that her husband took a prisoner in a battle like that. You don't care, though. You don't think about me at all. You grumble and scold all the time. I'm sick of it. Be quiet, I tell you!"

But without heeding him Otter Woman went on, her face twisted into a sarcastic smile.

"All the Indians are laughing at you," she gibed. "They say the fire-water you had that day made you so foolish that you thought you had found a big strong woman instead of this weasel without a skin. Only one who was crazy would have done a thing like that. Yes, truly, you were crazy."

This was more than Eagle Tail could stand.

"Your tongue is forked," he shouted, his voice shaking with anger. "I took her as you very well know because long ago a relation of hers stole my sister. The other Indians know it too. I was not crazy. Who told you those lies?"

"Running Wolf told me that you were crazy with drink, and Morning Singer said he saw you trying to scalp a cooking pot," retorted Otter Woman with a mocking laugh. "They all laughed at you when you put this creature behind your saddle and boasted that you had a fine new wife."

Angry and humiliated, Eagle Tail made one more effort to defend his action.

"Well, I wanted this woman as I told you, and anyway, my horse could not carry a heavy one. Besides," he added provocatively,"I liked her looks!"

"Looks!" shrieked Otter Woman rising to her feet, her eyes blazing."Looks! You call that red-eyed piece of dried-up sinew good-looking!Why, her bones stick out like those of a cayuse in winter.! Now I know you are crazy!"

At this final insult Eagle Tail, speechless with rage, seized his rawhide whip, sprang from his couch, and laid the quirt with swift and repeated blows about the buxom shoulders of his rebellious spouse. Time after time the heavy whip descended, while the woman screamed and writhed under its stinging impact and tried by pulling up her

blanket to protect her face and neck. She at length managed to reach the opening of the tent, stumbled through it, and ran crying to the far end of the camp.

Her husband made no attempt to follow her, but stood within the tent doorway, a dark scowl upon his face. Seeing her reach and enter the home of Morning Singer, her brother, he gave a grunt of disgust, threw down his whip, and seated himself once more upon the pile of skins which served as bed, table, and chair, where he remained sulking for the rest of the evening.

It was late when Otter Woman crept back to her teepee and sought her bed in shame and trepidation. And it was later still when, with one accord, the innumerable curs of the camp broke into loud and prolonged barking and yelping. The startled inhabitants, roused thus suddenly from sleep, strained their eyes to listen, but all that they could hear was the scampering of many hoofs, and the renewed clamour of the dogs which gradually died down as the sound of galloping horses faded into the distance. Many anxious moments passed, but the dreaded warwhoops came not, nor did the keen blades of murderous knives slit the sides of the teepees to stab viciously at a chance recumbent figure. Finally, with sighs of relief, the men laid down the weapons they had instinctively snatched at the first alarm, amd once more retired to rest. Apparently there was nothing to fear.

"A wolf has frightened the horses and stampeded them," they reasoned. "As soon as the light comes we must look for them before they get too far away.

Accordingly at dawn the braves started out on foot to seek their missing ponies, easily following the tracks down the hill to the river bottom where they would most likely be scattered through the thick willow brush with which the valley was covered.

They had been gone scarcely an hour when a succession of hideous shrieks split the air. A number of Cree warriors, painted and bedizened, started up from their ambush in the coulee behind the Blackfoot tents. Yelling, firing their muskets and brandishing their tomahawks, they pursued the terrified women and children who alone were left in the camp. Like fiends incarnate they hacked and butchered the helpless and bewildered creatures with ruthless determination. A few by good luck managed to escape into the nearby thickets, but within a few moments most of them, cut down and savagely scalped, lay dead or dying about the encampment.

"Where is the Cree woman?" demanded a hideously painted warrior of a terrified girl whom he had caught by the arm.

Dumb with fear, she pointed to Eagle Tail's tent; whereupon, with a swift circular movement, he sliced off her scalp and part of her forehead. She sank screaming to the ground.

Her murderer, stuffing his trophy into his belt, turned and ran to the teepee she had indicated. Throwing aside the tent-flap he entered, and there found the object of his search huddled together with Otter Woman in the middle of the lodge, shivering in mingled hope and terror; for the prisoner had fancied she could descry the voices of her Cree husband and of her brother, and was straining her ears to ascertain whether the attackers were men of her own tribe or of another band, and therefore as much to be feared by her as by Otter Woman.

On seeing the man enter, his knife yet dripping with blood, she uttered a cry of joy and relief and sprang to his side.
"Oh, my husband," she cried, "it was indeed your voice that I heard. Oh, take me away from this place!"
He grinned fiendishly, the while his predatory eye took in the shrinking

figure of Otter Woman, crouching as far from the doorway as she could.

"Who is this woman?" he demanded.

"That's Eagle Tail's wife. He it was who stole me and brought me here."

"Huh! he stole my woman. Now I steal his!" growled the brave. And catching Otter Woman roughly by the arm, he dragged her shrieking out of the tent.

By this time the remainder of the Crees had looted the other teepees, and now, laden with scalps, beadwork, and other booty, they hastened towards their horses, anxious to be off and miles away before the decoyed Blackfoot men returned and found the havoc that had been wrought. The rescued squaw was placed behind her husband, and Otter Woman, knowing that it would be useless to resist, clambered up behind another warrior, and the party set off in triumph for their distant camp.

The rage and fury of the Blackfoot braves when they returned to their ruined homes was inexpressible. Raving and cursing, running here and there like men distraught, they called the names of their wives and children. The few who had escaped crept back and with many tears told of the sudden appearance of the enemy and of the frightful deeds they had committed. Many a husband found with rage and despair the hacked and wounded bodies of his womenfolk lying in convulsed heaps upon the ground. Many a father viewed with bitter grief the mangled forms of his little ones who, but a few short hours before, had been playing and laughing about him.

Vowing horrible and deadly vengeance the men, leaving the few surviving women to bewail their dead, mounted their recovered steeds, sought the tracks of the enemy, and finding them with little difficulty, were soon in hot pursuit.

Towards noon, the horses of the Crees were showing signs of weariness, and those carrying double loads were beginning to lag behind. They had travelled many miles during the last few days, and some were already leg-weary. But to halt was as yet unwise, for the way still led over the open prairie where they could be seen for many a mile, and the nearest river valley with its sheltering thickets of willow and poplar was far in the distance.

Suddenly one of the men turned his horse, pulled up, and gazed searchingly in the direction from which they had come. There, close to the horizon, was a small black speck. As he watched, it resolved into a number of dots which grew rapidly larger. With a wild yell of warning he raced after his comrades. Applying yet more vigorously their whips to the flanks of their tired mounts, they urged them to their best speed. One of them put its foot into a gopher hole and fell, breaking its leg. The rider, flung headlong, shouted to his friends to pick him up, but they, unconscious of the accident, and desperately endeavouring to reach the river by whose wooded banks they would have some chance of escape, heard him not, and swept on oblivious to his cries, leaving him to be the victim a short time after of a Blackfoot hunting-knife.

Meanwhile the pursuers, who had caught sight of their quarry just before the Crees sighted them, redoubled their efforts. Gradually the distance between them was lessened, and before the pursued had reached the river arrows began to fly, and the few who had muskets fired them as quickly as they could load.

Reaching at length the cut bank which sloped abruptly to the river bottom, the Crees rode their horses recklessly over the edge and down the steep, cliff-like wall of shale and sand. Some, once out of

sight of the rapidly approaching enemy, threw themselves from their h horses, and crept up again to the top of the bank, sheltering behind a few scrubby willows, and discharging their muskets and arrows at the Blackfoot warriors who returned the fire with interest.

The two doubly laden ponies reached the cut bank some moments after the rest had gone down. The Blackfeet purposely withheld their fire from Otter Woman's captor for fear of wounding her; but just as the Cree woman and her husband were about to descend the face of the cliff, an arrow from the bow of Eagle Tail struck the buckskin cayuse they were riding. On the very brink the animal reared up, swayed for a moment, then plunged forward and rolled over and over to the b bottom. The two riders, crushed to instant death, lay huddled halfway down, their bodies caught against a projecting rock.

The Blackfeet now pressed closely towards the bank, whooping and yelling in triumph; but their joy was shortlived, for in a few moments several of their own horses were badly wounded and the riders afoot. They withdrew to a little distance, and seeing this, the remaining Crees crept softly down the bank, mounted their waiting horses, and soon overtook their comrade with the Blackfoot woman still riding behind him.

Their steed was still going heavily, exhausted with the long ride and the double load. Soon all the other Crees had passed them and disappeared along the pathe which led snake-wise through the thickets.

Otter Woman held on doggedly. Her head was dizzy and swimmimg, and her limbs felt almost numb. Mechanically she dodged her head to one side or the other to escape the low branches which overhung the trail. As they dashed into the water to ford the swiftly flowing stream, she gripped her companion more tightly about the waist. Her fingers encountered something cold and hard. A wild hope surged into her heart.

Waiting until the horse had clambered up the opposite bank and the Cree was again wielding his quirt with savage, slashing blows, she stealthily drew from out its sheath a long, wicked-looking knife, the blade still stained with the blood of that morning's victims.

Leaning far back, Otter Woman raised the weapon above her head, and with swift, unerring aim, plunged it between the shoulder blades of the unsuspecting brave. Without a cry he fell forward upon his horse's neck; then his body sagged, slipped sideways, and fell with a thud to the ground.

Relieved of half his burden, the frightened animal dashed on for a little distance, but was too tired to keep up its speed and soon dropped to a walk. Otter Woman was presently able to secure the bridle, and turning the weary creature round, made her way slowly back to the home of her own people.

Loud were the shouts and eager the questions when, many hours later, the Blackfoot woman rode into her camp. Forgetful for the moment of their sorrow the Indians clustered round her, breaking anew into wailing and lamentation as the names of those they would see no more came into her story, and with them the remembrance of their loss.

And at night, when the bodies of the slain had with wailing and tears been hoisted to their last resting place in the Dead Man's Bush, Otter Woman and her husband returned once more to their teepee. There, with the cause of strife removed, they sat at peace; and when his wife had for the twentieth time told her story, Eagle Tail removed his pipe from out his mouth and spat upon the ground.

"It's a good thing that Cree woman is gone," he remarked, handsomely. "I knew I should soon get tired of her. So I shot and killed both her and her husband. Look!"

And from his belt he took two long and gory scalp-locks, and swung them to and fro before Otter Woman's amazed and fascinated eyes!